

Visit to Terre des Hommes Valais - La Maison

At our Thanksgiving Lunch in November we were extremely pleased to be able to hand over more than forty school packs to Bertrand Gaillard public relations officer for Terre des Hommes Valais.

Early in January I accompanied Joanne Ray on a visit to La Maison, situated at the base of the Mountains in Monthey, to deliver more school supplies, find out more about the work of the organisation and hopefully to meet some of the children who would be receiving one of the school packs that we had donated.

The association Terre des Hommes Valais was created in 1963 by Paul Veillon who was town councillor. He originally wanted to help Algerian children who could not get the medical help they needed in their own country. Today, they come from all over the African continent.

At first Swiss families in the village looked after the children before and after their medical treatments. It became obvious that this set up was not sustainable. Often there were problems when the children arrived. The children were accompanied only by airline or medical staff, not by family members. Many stayed for a number of months making it difficult for them and the families when they returned home. Acknowledging cultural differences and the need to have provision where the children could receive twenty four hour medical care and attention, led to the decision to create the centre which was built in 1969 and took the name La Maison.

Terre des Hommes Valais works with a number of organisations in Lausanne, Geneva and Bern who provide the transport, operations or medical treatment these children need. **It is affiliated to Terre des Hommes Lausanne but is financially independent.** Mr Gaillard presented us with many facts and figures relating to the work the organisation does. Each year La Maison cares for over 200 children pre and post operation. The house is alive with hope for the future. Everyone we talked to from the ladies in the laundry (definitely a very busy place), to the nurse in the treatment room (who we found out was English) loved their jobs and felt rewarded to see just what a difference had been made to the lives of the children fortunate enough to come through the door. Some children have heart problems (disease, angina)

others, normal sequelae (creating problems with the esophagus, having a 80% mortality rate)

However the startling facts make you realise that they are the lucky ones and we are extremely privileged but often take for granted basic provisions that are not available to everyone.

Each year 9.7 million children under the age of five die 26,500 a day!! Mr Gaillard explained that many of these deaths could be prevented by providing the basics of clean water, food, vaccinations and antibiotics to those in need. Terre des Hommes are working with organisations world wide to increase awareness in health education. If families know how to care for themselves and their children receive vaccinations and antibiotics many of these deaths can be prevented. Education is vital. When the children leave La Maison they are given clothes for both themselves and their siblings and also take back one of the school packs that we provided. Education hopefully will lead to better lives.

As I mentioned La Maison is financially independent. During the year it has a number of fund raising activities that you might like to become involved with. On 6/7/8 March in Canton Valais you can purchase oranges. These are sold and the profits contribute to running costs. They are still looking for people to sell oranges. More information can be found on their website. A sponsored walk takes place every year in September and a three day music festival also an annual event takes place this year on 4/5/6 September.

We were moved by our visit. It was so clear to see that the staff were extremely motivated and ready to do all they could for the children. We are sure that it must be difficult for them when they say goodbye but also rewarding to know that the quality of life that these children will have when they return home has increased beyond recognition. We hope that we have another opportunity to donate school supplies to La Maison and we are already starting to collect pens and crayons in readiness. If you would like to know more about the work done by the organisation, we would recommend taking a look at their website: www.tdh-valais.ch

Gill Hibbs - February 2009